



Tilburg University

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Published in:
Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Varis, P. (2020). Trump tweets the truth: Metric populism and media conspiracy. *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada*, 59(1). https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_issuetoc&pid=0103-181320200001&lng=en&nrm=iso

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TRUMP TWEETS THE TRUTH: METRIC POPULISM AND MEDIA CONSPIRACY

TRUMP TWITTA A VERDADE: POPULISMO MÉTRICO E CONSPIRAÇÃO MIDIÁTICA

Piia Varis*

ABSTRACT

Since its inception, studies on ‘digital populism’ have focused mainly on the savviness of populist movements and politicians in their use of social media. The focus in this paper is different: we know quite a bit already about what populists *do* on and through social media, but very little has been written about what populists say *about* social media – how they frame them as environments for political communication, and with what kinds of implications. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have not only become central players in present-day debates regarding free speech, political correctness and truth/fake, but also become part of (populist) political discourse in terms of their content moderation policies and intervention, or lack thereof. I will explore these issues through an examination of Donald Trump’s discourse on social media as an environment for political communication, and their moderation policies.

Keywords: populism; social media; conspiracy; Trump; Twitter.

RESUMO

Desde seu surgimento, estudos sobre ‘populismo digital’ têm focado principalmente na perspicácia de movimentos e políticos populistas em seu uso de mídias sociais. O foco deste artigo é diferente: temos já certa quantidade de conhecimento sobre o que os/as populistas *fazem* nas e pelas mídias digitais, mas pouco se escreveu sobre o que populistas dizem *sobre* mídias sociais – como eles/elas enquadram tais mídias como ambientes de comunicação política, e com quais tipos de implicações. As plataformas de mídias sociais, como Facebook e Twitter, têm não apenas se tornado agentes centrais nos debates correntes sobre liberdade de expressão, linguagem politicamente correta e verdade/*fake*, mas também se tornaram parte do discurso político (populista) em termos de suas políticas de moderação e intervenção em conteúdo, ou em termos da falta delas. Explorarei essas questões por meio do exame do discurso de Donald Trump nas mídias sociais como um ambiente para comunicação política e em suas políticas de moderação.

Palavras-chave: populismo, mídias sociais, conspiração, Trump, Twitter.

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INTRODUCTION

On March 9, 2020, Donald Trump's re-election campaign sent a letter to Twitter, complaining of what they saw as Twitter's double standards in their treatment of presidential candidates. "(...) it appears that many people employed by Big Tech corporations in Silicon Valley are assisting the [Joe] Biden campaign", they write, "by instituting a special 'Biden protection rule' that effectively censors and silences legitimate political speech Biden's campaign and its supporters do not like." The letter mentions a Biden campaign video that, according to the letter, "manipulates audio and video of President Trump in order to mislead Americans and give a false impression." while alleging that "Of course, this is not the first time the Biden campaign has used editing tricks to manipulate video and feed misinformation to the American people."¹

This example is not only telling regarding the kinds of themes and issues that have become part of the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaigns, specifically in terms of politics of information. It also points to questions of more general interest in today's media environment, such as concerns regarding misinformation online, and the manipulation of all kinds of material and their spread on social media. For the purposes of this paper, the most interesting aspect of the above is the very role of Twitter and other social media platforms, and how that role is being framed in (populist) political discourse.

Since its inception, studies on 'digital populism' (Bartlett et al. 2011) have focused mainly on the savviness of populist movements and politicians in their use of social media (see e.g. Maly 2018 on algorithmic populism). The focus in this paper is different: we know quite a bit already about what populists *do* on and through social media, but very little has been written about what populists say *about* social media – how they frame them as environments for political communication, and with what kinds of implications. One way to characterise this issue is through what Gershon (2010: 3) has defined as media ideologies, "(...) a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning. That is to say, what people think about the media they use will shape the way they use media" (see also Varis 2017). Media ideologies have become part and parcel of debates regarding political communication; major for-profit social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have not only become central players in present-day debates regarding free speech, political correctness

1. https://assets.donaldjtrump.com/2017/web/hero_images/Twitter_-_3-9-2020.pdf

and truth/fake, but also become part of (populist) political discourse in terms of their content moderation policies and intervention, or lack thereof.

I will explore these issues through an examination of Donald Trump's discourse on social media as an environment for political communication, and their moderation policies. While it may seem that Trump's tweets have already been discussed ad nauseam, there is still much to say about what goes on in his Twitter account, and for the purposes of this paper, I will be limiting myself to his tweets on this topic.

Donald Trump has been a prolific tweeter for years already, and was also praising social media as a channel well before he even became a presidential candidate, as in this 2012 tweet: "Social media has changed the news & communication landscape for good. Everything must be up to date by the second instead of the hour or day"². His social media, and in particular Twitter use, has since of course become a phenomenon in itself. As Jacquemet (2019: 88) explains, Trump's tweeting is

(...) remediated by other social media users through retweets, mentions, critiques, and likes, then remediated again by formal and informal media – blogs, print, televisual, networked, and 'fake' news outlets. The end result of this process is that Trump uses tweets to redevelop media neighborhoods under his name and crowd out other competitors for as many news cycles as he can control, sometimes for a short time and sometimes for days, weeks, or even, in rare instances, months.

While Trump's tweets drive news cycles and often set the agenda for media reporting, apart from what Trump tweets, there is the metapragmatics of what is being tweeted. One broader context for the analysis below is a discussion that has been ongoing for some years now, namely the one regarding content moderation on social media and its political dimensions. Articles such as 'Former Facebook workers: We routinely suppressed conservative news'³ published by Gizmodo in 2016 and featuring what are presented as 'whistleblowers' have fuelled the discussion and mediated it into a part of political discourse. Numerous politicians and activists have raised the issue of what they see as biased moderation, and the Trumpian medium Breitbart, for instance, has also been fanning the flames, with articles such as 'Twitter is banning conservatives for posting facts'⁴ and 'Brazil: Stabbing, Facebook censorship fail to stop conservative Jair Bolsonaro's presidential

2. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/268819094642499586> (November 14, 2012)

3. <https://gizmodo.com/former-facebook-workers-we-routinely-suppressed-conser-1775461006> (May 9, 2016)

4. <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2018/05/09/twitter-is-banning-conservatives-for-posting-facts/> (May 9, 2018)

lead'⁵. The frame is that of social media censoring and 'blacklisting', and the specific targeting of certain – right-wing populist – political voices. While my discussion below focuses on Donald Trump's discourse on the issue, this is by no means a phenomenon limited to the U.S. context only, and cries of social media censorship and suppression of the voice of 'the people' have been heard in many countries.

I will now turn to Trump. As is abundantly clear to everyone with even a passing interest in Trump's Twitter behaviour, there is certainly a lot of material to look into. For the purposes of this paper, I will have to exclude quite a few of the issues that come up in the tweets discussed below, and present more of an outline of the issues relevant for the focus of this paper before drawing some implications of all this in the conclusion.

1. THE METRIC POPULIST TWEETING THE TRUTH

In his tweets, Trump has often specifically touted the 'truth-telling' function of social media:

"The Fake News Media works hard at disparaging & demeaning my use of social media because they don't want America to hear the real story!"⁶

"Only the Fake News Media and Trump enemies want me to stop using Social Media (110 million people). Only way for me to get the truth out!"⁷

"The Fake News Media hates when I use what has turned out to be my very powerful Social Media – over 100 million people! I can go around them!"⁸

"The FAKE MSM [mainstream media] is working so hard trying to get me not to use Social Media. They hate that I can get the honest and unfiltered message out."⁹

"I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair 'press,' now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent 'sources' are being used more often than ever. Many stories & reports a pure fiction!"¹⁰

Social media is framed as a channel for providing 'facts' against the fictions propagated by mainstream media. Trump's own social media activity is about honesty and getting the truth out there, and in all of this he is facing seemingly powerful enemies that try to prevent him from getting the truth out – that is, they are not only trying to suppress Trump's speech, but *the truth*. These tweets do not

5. <https://www.breitbart.com/latin-america/2018/10/25/brazil-stabbing-facebook-censorship-fail-stop-conservative-jair-bolsonaros-presidential-lead/> (October 25, 2018)

6. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/868985285207629825> (May 29, 2017)

7. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/892383242535481344> (August 1, 2017); see also <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/940930017365778432> (December 13, 2017)

8. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/875690204564258816> (June 16, 2017)

9. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/872059997429022722> (June 6, 2017)

10. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/947235015343202304> (December 30, 2017)

only construct an enemy to focus on, but also Trump himself as providing the unmediated, unfiltered truth. In a similar vein, before his presidency Trump also framed social media as a tool for ‘exposing’ things such as ‘dishonest’ and ‘crooked’ politicians and their misdeeds¹¹. This is not only about the populist ‘telling it as it is’, but also social media as a mediator that does not mediate, and as such ‘the people’s medium’, as it enables Trump to ventriloquise their view and/or the truth to the people, uncorrupted by fake media.

What is also clear from the above examples is that *popularity* plays a considerable role in Trump’s framing of his social media activity. In the age of metric media, the ‘100 million’ is an index of his support and popularity. As Blommaert (2018: 5, emphasis original) concludes in his analysis of Trump’s tweets,

We get a copybook example here of ‘vox populism’, the version of populism that is centered around manufactured representations of the ‘voice of the people’: first, I teach you how to talk like me, after which I can claim to talk like you, to represent your voice and turn it into a political, ‘democratic’ program. And virality becomes a crucial infrastructure for such vox populism: look at the many thousands who retweet my words. Surely I *must* be a democratic politician. I must be the *most* democratic one ever.

While Trump’s repeated reference to the millions is meant to give the impression of speaking for ‘the people’, there is of course no way of pinning down the actual meaning of social media numbers such as these. A large follower count and/or a large number of reactions to specific social media activity may be a sign of any number of things – support or interest, actual or manufactured. In this regard, Trump has also juxtaposed himself with one of his nemeses, Hillary Clinton, in whose case a large number of followers indexes fakeness¹². Unlike with Clinton, Trump’s numbers in contrast are real, and the large number a reflection of the extent to which he speaks for people. All of this is perhaps not particularly surprising for a reality-tv-star-turned-president who has a longstanding obsession with ‘ratings’. But given how metric-centric social media platforms are, these numbers become an obvious index of his standing among the people. As above with the ‘100 million’, in 2016 he tweeted a link to a USA Today article titled ‘Trump shows complete domination of Facebook conversation’, stating that ‘Trump generated more Facebook chatter than all the other candidates combined in December’.¹³ More recently, in February 2020, he made a similar statement about Facebook:

11. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/706829345143316480> (March 7, 2016); <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/706675395811266560> (March 7, 2016)

12. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/612993201046179841> (‘Hillary Clinton dominates the pack in fake Twitter followers’, June 22, 2015)

13. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/692093970034343936> (January 26, 2016)

"Great honor, I think? Mark Zuckerberg recently stated that "Donald J. Trump is Number 1 on Facebook. Number 2 is Prime Minister Modi of India." Actually, I am going to India in two weeks. Looking forward to it!"¹⁴

Trump is not, in fact, number one on Facebook (as determined by visible metrics), as other Twitter users were also quick to point out¹⁵. The actual standing in terms of the metrics is not even what matters here per se; it is more the fact that they have become such a rhetorical tool. Another example where the metrics return is the social media activity of the president's son, Donald Trump Jr., who has been very active in posting supposed exposés of social media censorship. Here, for instance, he blames 'the social media masters' for censorship on Instagram:

Give me a break. Here we go again with the [@Instagram](#) censorship. As we've gotten closer to the caucuses/primaries I've seen my numbers drop but this ad, which was one of the most talked about from the [#SuperBowl](#) put out by the President, to only have 57,000 views and 265 comments on my account after being up for four hours is literally unprecedented. Even if people have seen the ad they would like or comment or watch it again because it was that heartwarming and emotional. (...) The social media masters are at it again apparently trying to influence election and preventing people from seeing and following the messages of those they want to hear from. The censorship must stop. This is what we were up against folks if this was someone other than Donald Trump or if this was a Liberal candidate you would never even imagine that this kind of BS could be happening.¹⁶

This shows another dimension of the metric media rhetoric: the quantities point more directly to absence and invisibility, and consequently to the supposed extent of *actual* supporters of Trump's message, rendered invisible by conspiring social media platforms. In this message, Donald Trump Jr. has been joined by his father on Twitter:

Twitter has removed many people from my account and, more importantly, they have seemingly done something that makes it much harder to join – they have stifled growth to a point where it is obvious to all. A few weeks ago it was a Rocket Ship, now it is a Blimp! Total Bias?¹⁷

Facebook, Twitter and Google are so biased toward the Dems it is ridiculous! Twitter, in fact, has made it much more difficult for people to join [@realDonaldTrump](#). They have removed many names & greatly slowed the level and speed of increase. They have acknowledged-done NOTHING!¹⁸

14. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1228463577335554049> (February 15, 2020)

15. E.g. <https://twitter.com/JamesMSama/status/1230613257762869248>

16. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8HQjw0F76E/> (February 3, 2020)

17. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1055822810940129283> (October 26, 2018)

18. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1075004324567285761> (December 18, 2018)

Through these tweets, Trump again does a number of different things: while he does hedge with ‘seemingly’, he makes the claim that Twitter is slowing things down for him. The bottom line is that more people would like to follow Trump, but it has been made ‘much more difficult’ to do. The inference is either that a follower equals a supporter (which is naturally not the case), or that as long as the numbers are good, it is possible to speak about delivering ‘the truth’ and speaking for the people, bypassing the crooked media. In the latter tweet above, Trump lumps together the big three of Facebook, Twitter and Google not only as all being against him, but specifically favouring the Democratic Party. Again, the metrics are invoked but importantly in two different senses: it is not only that more people are supposedly eagerly trying to follow Trump, only to be hampered by Twitter, but also that the number of followers, if it were not for Twitter’s actions against him, would be growing rapidly. The latter tweet also includes another important theme, apart from specifically invoking metrics, that Trump has pointed to repeatedly: that social media, and tech companies in general, simply are biased against him in other ways, too.

2. SILENCED BY BIASED SOCIAL MEDIA

In July 2019, Trump organised the White House Social Media Summit, and took to Twitter to make the point that he took the occasion as an opportunity to raise the issue of his unfair treatment by social media platforms. Below some parts of the thread:

A big subject today at the White House Social Media Summit will be the tremendous dishonesty, bias, discrimination and suppression practiced by certain companies. We will not let them get away with it much longer. The Fake News Media will also be there, but for a limited period.....The Fake News is not as important, or as powerful, as Social Media. They have lost tremendous credibility since that day in November, 2016, that I came down the escalator with the person who was to become your future First Lady. When I ultimately leave office in six.....years, or maybe 10 or 14 (just kidding), they will quickly go out of business for lack of credibility, or approval, from the public. (...) Sorry to say that even Social Media would be driven out of business along with, and finally, the Fake News Media!¹⁹

There is so much going on in this tweet that a thorough analysis would require an article of its own. For my purposes here, it is worth drawing attention to the ‘tremendous dishonesty, bias, discrimination and suppression’ that Trump highlights. He has made similar comments on a number of occasions. Sometimes

19. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1149345678814060545> (July 11, 2019)

these remarks are as general as “Big attacks on Republicans and Conservatives by Social Media. Not good!”²⁰, but there are also times when his accusations of bias have been more specific: for instance, in the autumn of 2016, he tweeted “Wow, Twitter, Google and Facebook are burying the FBI criminal investigation of Clinton. Very dishonest media!”²¹. All in all, according to Trump, these companies are not only discriminating against him, but they are also actively helping his political opponents (Clinton), and silencing also those sharing his views. As put by Trump:

Social Media Giants are silencing millions of people. Can't do this even if it means we must continue to hear Fake News like CNN, whose ratings have suffered gravely. People have to figure out what is real, and what is not, without censorship!²²

It appears that the ‘millions’ here does not stand for people literally silenced by social media through banning or censoring – or at least that as a claim would seem, even by Trump’s standards, to be outlandish. As above (and Blommaert 2018), the ‘millions’ here is more likely to stand for the *voice* of these people, represented on social media by the likes of Trump, and those sharing his views. Further, not only is Trump advocating for the visibility of the people’s voice, but he is also taking a stance on moderation more broadly: it is the people themselves who will need to ‘figure out what is real’. This he frames as a question of censorship – which is, of course, not the only possible way to frame social media content moderation (see Gillespie 2018). Also, as will become clear below, ‘censorship’ is a problem when it is about Trump, but not a problem when it is about his adversaries.

Finally, in the below, Trump again makes the claim that the companies are not only against him, but actively taking the side of his political opponents – here specifically the ‘radical left’:

Facebook, Google and Twitter, not to mention the Corrupt media, are soooo on the side of the Radical Left Democrats. But fear not, we will win anyway, just like we did before! #MAGA²³

As such, Trump evokes the classical populist conspiracy narrative of taking on enemies whom are powerful, yes, but not powerful enough to stand a chance against him, or his people. Trump’s Twitter tirades about ‘fake news’ mainstream media have received a lot of attention, but it is worth noting that in the above, as in

20. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1127622664477134848> (May 12, 2019); also e.g. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1030777074959757313> (August 18, 2018)

21. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/792734426912337920> (October 30, 2016)

22. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1032954224529817600> (August 24, 2018)

23. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1108004465121075200> (March 19, 2019)

many other of his tweets, he presents the ‘corrupt media’ as being in cahoots with social media and/or tech companies, all working against him.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA BAN THE WRONG PEOPLE

Several of the tweets above feature the invisible enemy that Trump has constructed regarding the way in which it has been made ‘harder’ for people to follow him, or the poor exposure of Trump Jr.’s social media ad, for instance. A further case is Trump Sr. evoking the issue of ‘shadow banning’²⁴ as a problem:

Twitter ‘SHADOW BANNING’ prominent Republicans. Not good. We will look into this discriminatory and illegal practice at once! Many complaints.²⁵

Social media platforms are of course not obliged to give anyone a voice, so even if the accusation of discrimination was justifiable, illegality is not, unlike Trump suggests, an issue. The ‘many complaints’ regarding the invisible threat of shadow banning remain subjectless; this is akin to what Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) have called the ‘a lot people are saying’ kind of present-day conspiracism, where allegations abound but narrative is lacking, to put it mildly (see also Varis 2019). Trump takes the stance of a tough leader here, and importantly for my purposes, talks about ‘prominent Republicans’. He has on several occasions mentioned specific individuals, such as vloggers and Fox personalities Diamond and Silk, and actor and vocal Republican James Woods:

The wonderful Diamond and Silk have been treated so horribly by Facebook. They work so hard and what has been done to them is very sad – and we’re looking into it. It’s getting worse and worse for Conservatives on social media!²⁶

How can it be possible that James Woods (and many others), a strong but responsible Conservative Voice, is banned from Twitter? Social Media & Fake News Media, together with their partner, the Democrat Party, have no idea the problems they are causing for themselves. VERY UNFAIR!²⁷

Here, Trump again makes a more sweeping claim, presenting Woods’ case as indexing a bigger problem (‘and many [unnamed] others’). Trump has loudly supported Woods who was indeed suspended by Twitter in 2019 for threatening

24. Shadow banning refers to the practice of blocking a user and/or their content from being visible to others, without the user being aware of the blocking having taken place.

25. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1022447980408983552> (On July 26, 2018)

26. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1124454393749934080> (May 3, 2019)

27. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1124743267873116160> (May 4, 2019)

violence; Woods is also known for promoting conspiracy theories and sharing misinformation on Twitter. In the latter tweet, Trump also makes the most comprehensive accusation of a conspiracy: social media, the ‘fake news media’, and the Democratic Party are ‘partners’ working against him, and by extension against everyone like-minded. The extent of the threat is also clear from the below where Trump retweets a MAGA ‘political activist’ account (which since includes in its bio ‘PROUDLY retweeted by President Trump 5/22/19’):

RT J_TrumpIN “Twitter VICIOUS censorship still hitting MAGA movement HARD. JAMES WOODS SUSPENDED DAY 32! If you think this is TOTAL BS, Let’s make one last ditch effort to bring @RealJamesWoods back, 1. Share this tweet 2. Reply to this tweet 3. Follow ALL who RT & Reply NO MATTER WHAT”²⁸

The enemy is vicious – in all caps, no less – and formidable (hitting HARD), against the whole MAGA movement. The above is also an example of an effort to rile up supporters and take part in a protest against Twitter. James Woods has been a reoccurring figure in Trump’s social media bias tweets, below in a somewhat different frame:

So surprised to see Conservative thinkers like James Woods banned from Twitter, and Paul Watson banned from Facebook!²⁹

Here Woods appears with Paul Joseph Watson of YouTube fame, known for broadcasting conspiracy theories. Trump elevates the two as ‘Conservative thinkers’, a clear example of how his Twitter account is for simultaneously broadcasting and narrowcasting: this tweet for instance is likely to have numerous different text trajectories, with those ridiculing or questioning the outrage, as well as those in the eyes of whom there is legitimate surprise in finding such characters suspended by social media platforms. The tweet includes a link to a May 3, 2019 Breitbart article titled ‘James Woods banned from Twitter and Silicon Valley’s conservative blacklisting campaign’³⁰. The article states that “Twitter does not appear to have the same standard for leftists. As Breitbart News has reported, there are several examples of actual violent threats going unchecked by the social media company.”, proceeding to give a list of examples. The article also states, for instance, that “Woods has been locked out of his account before for posting a meme.”, linking to their

28. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1131146945676886016> (May 22, 2019)

29. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1124454991341793281> (May 3, 2019)

30. <https://www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2019/05/03/james-woods-banned-from-twitter-amid-silicon-valleys-conservative-blacklisting-campaign/>

own news story about it³¹. This is another interesting strategy in the social media censorship discourse; to the point of seeming like a parody publication, Breitbart in general often delivers its commentary in the most ridiculing frame possible. Here, they are of course evoking the widely shared ‘meme ideology’ – that nothing remotely serious can be associated with memes as a genre of communication (see Varis 2019). When someone is framed as being suspended for sharing ‘a meme’, shock and outrage of course is a predictable response. This is the kind of simplistic digital cultural and media ideological framing that the discourse often relies on, for maximal sensationalising effect and mobilisation of supporters to protest the ‘political correctness’ of ‘snowflakes’.

Most of the tweets in this section come from May 2019, when Trump was particularly active on the issue of censorship – not coincidentally of course, as for instance James Woods was suspended from Twitter in April 2019. The below is also from this period, with Trump switching frames to make an appeal to national values:

I am continuing to monitor the censorship of AMERICAN CITIZENS on social media platforms. This is the United States of America — and we have what’s known as FREEDOM OF SPEECH! We are monitoring and watching, closely!!³²

Regardless of topic, Trump’s announcements of concern often include the promise and/or threat of ‘looking into’, or ‘watching’ a situation. Here Trump can also be seen as pressuring the platforms with his continued ‘monitoring’. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, while of course U.S.-based, are obviously not only used by Americans, nor are they serving only them. Trump is also evoking ‘freedom of speech’ as a justification for why the platforms are supposedly making wrong decisions. This is naturally not the first, or the last, time that speech is normatively framed as unrestrained due to its being ‘free’. While our ideas of a ‘semiotic democracy’ (Palfrey and Gasser 2008) supposedly brought about by social media platforms – as well as the PR and mission statements by social media platforms themselves – might suggest otherwise, the platforms of course did not come into being to function as the champions of democracy or the guardians of free speech. Trump has, however, evoked freedom of speech more than once in his protests against social media:

Twitter should let the banned Conservative Voices back onto their platform, without restriction. It’s called Freedom of Speech, remember. You are making a Giant Mistake!³³

31. <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2018/09/23/james-woods-locked-out-of-twitter-for-posting-meme/>

32. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1124447302544965634> (May 3, 2019)

33. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1137702218835136517> (June 9, 2019)

The capitals in ‘Giant Mistake’ appear to point to the considerable size of the error the platform is making; large or small, however, here is Trump again in any case trying to push the platform to yield. What exactly is being said on social media makes no difference; people need to ‘figure things out’ for themselves as seen above, and speech is, and should be, free.

To conclude, it should also be noted that, as expected, as far as Trump is concerned, speech is after all freer for some than it is for others. Enter the ‘fake news media’:

When will the Radical Left Wing Media apologize to me for knowingly getting the Russia Collusion Delusion story so wrong? The real story is about to happen! Why is @nytimes, @washingtonpost, @CNN, @MSNBC allowed to be on Twitter & Facebook. Much of what they do is FAKE NEWS!³⁴

Facebook has just stated that they are setting up a system to “purge” themselves of Fake News. Does that mean CNN will finally be put out of business?³⁵

It appears that it is not entirely up to ‘the people’ to figure things out for themselves, after all. It is Trump – and as we have seen, as long as they agree with him on everything, also his media (Fox News, Breitbart, OANN) – that have the ‘real story’, the facts, the unfiltered truth. As soon as social media moderation and accusations of bias became a widely discussed issue, Trump’s rhetorical repertoire expanded from social media as mediators that do not mediate, to mediators that should moderate.

CONCLUSIONS

I opened the paper with a recent example: a Trump campaign complaint about ‘Big Tech corporations in Silicon Valley’ supposedly siding with Trump’s political opponents. Companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google have indeed become central for political discourse in several different ways, not least because of their role as the source of news and information for huge numbers of people. For many, social media still continue to be seen as neutral conduits for speech – which they obviously are not, given the sorting, organising and prioritising of content (see e.g. van Dijck 2013). Gillespie (2018) also makes the point that content moderation is not somehow peripheral to what social media platforms do, but in fact central: they are constantly trying to please a number of different parties with varying positions

34. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1124653429366906882> (May 4, 2019)

35. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1054142516881248258> (October 22, 2018)

on what is ‘appropriate’ content – existing and potential new users, advertisers, etc. Increased media attention has also contributed to shaping media ideological narratives about platforms: we are reading about Twitter’s inability to ban white supremacists, because it would mean banning Republican politicians, too³⁶, and about conservatives learning ‘to wield power’ inside Facebook³⁷. Over the years, discussions regarding content moderation have become more and more frequent and heated.

As for Trump’s position, as with so many issues, he vacillates between seemingly incompatible positions. For one, he is the populist that ‘speaks his mind’, and social media is where his unfiltered speech can appear unfiltered, without mediators. And this is how it should be per Trump: truths are for people themselves to be figured out. This is the media ideological (Gershon 2010) position where the medium is either neutral in that it merely hosts users (giving access to an unfiltered Trump), or should not interfere. When the mediators mediate, they are ‘vicious’ suppressors of speech. Speech is free – unless it is about ‘fake news’, of course, which is when demands for moderation can be made.

Rhetorically speaking, this is all useful for Trump. Touting social media as the channel for truth and ‘the people’s medium’ helps him further undermine the mainstream ‘fake news’ media that he has been attacking for years now. And, when social media feature as one of the powerful adversaries that the populist hero is fighting against, it potentially works to steer the policies of social media companies which may not only be worried about Trump’s ire as such, but possible consequence of loss of users and advertisers, and perhaps might be in need of Trump’s support with for instance Senator Elizabeth Warren and others having proposed plans for increased regulation of social media companies.

Trump indeed at times presents social media as conspiring against him and his ilk, and accuses them for being in cahoots not only with traditional media, but also the Democratic Party. This is all statement and no substance, and also not surprising from someone who already as a presidential candidate focused on “eliciting and praising emotional responses from his fans rather than on detailed policy prescriptions” (Hochschild 2016: 225). It is also an example of the ‘a lot of people are saying’ (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019) conspiracy talk, where it seems that rather than conspiracy *theory*, we could talk about conspiracy *exclamation* (see

36. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/a3xgq5/why-wont-twitter-treat-white-supremacy-like-isis-because-it-would-mean-banning-some-republican-politicians-too (April 25, 2019)

37. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/02/20/facebook-republican-shift/> (February 20, 2020)

also Varis 2019). On social media in fact, one could argue, the more vagueness and gaps there are to the proposed conspiracy, the better: one's supporters will start to spread the word and ask the questions implied, and one's critics and skeptics will start to ask questions about (lack) of evidence if not the sanity of the one making the claim, resulting in numerous different text trajectories for the original prompt. Also, as Dean (2002: 58) has proposed, "Invoking conspiracy help[s] produce suspicious, political subjects. It call[s] into being a 'public' united around the conviction that conspiracies are afoot." In the case of Trump, one of the implications of his rhetoric regarding social media bias and censorship, and the conspiracies, is to evoke a 'people' that is being misled by the fake news, and silenced and suppressed on social media. Trump's vague conspiratorial airing of grievances thus can be seen as having a number of different effects.

Many have of course pointed to the symbiotic relationship between populism, especially the right-wing sort, and conspiracy theories (e.g. Fenster 2008; Müller 2016; Bergmann 2018). Metric social media, where numbers are not only very prominent in the interfaces, but also get assigned all kinds of meanings (Varis 2020) by users – and researchers as well – of course lend themselves well for certain kinds of conspiracy theories (or exclamations). The relationship between the visible interface and what users encounter, and the human and non-human activities that go into producing the visible results is opaque. The metrics are politicised in a number of ways, and this has also led to new kinds of digital practices (Jones et al. 2015) including digital inaction or resisting the types of actions built into the platforms. One example of this is the exhortation 'don't retweet account X', and taking screenshots rather than retweeting specific kinds of content – this is something that one sees being done with Donald Trump, for instance. This is of course not only because – while as mentioned, specific metrics may in fact be the result of a number of things, 'authentic' as well as 'manufactured' (though the line between the two is obviously porous) – large numbers of followers and reactions have come to stand for 'popularity' and 'importance', but also because the biggest corporate social media platforms work according to the popularity principle (van Dijck 2013) where more is better, as accounts with large numbers of followers and interactions are given more weight and consequently more visibility. In Trump's metric populist discourse, the numbers index the voice of the people (and Trump as broadcasting it), and low numbers or deceleration of growth of followers are framed as indexical of bias and suppression.

The populist framing of social media as neutrally hosting the 'voice of the people' sets the scene for airing often conspiratorial grievances regarding censorship

and suppression; as soon as bias becomes part of the frame, metrics cease to be an indication of the extent of the populist's popularity or the representativeness of the populist's voice, and become an index of censorship. This is a good example of the extent to which social media metrics and virality are about rhetoric; the kinds of meanings we attach to numbers, which in many cases come to stand for 'facts' regarding whatever it is they are made to frame. The focus on metrics – by 'ordinary' users, metric populists such as Trump, as well as, still, by researchers alike – has been recently thrown into sharp relief by for instance Instagram testing the hiding of certain numbers on its interface; absent numbers, the semiotics and intertextual makings of text trajectories, groups and viralities (see also Varis and Blommaert 2015) return to more relevance again. In the larger frame of social media and democracy, as this paper has also gestured towards, we should continue to explore more critically what social media metrics and how they are framed tell us about 'the people'.

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Recebido: 26/03/2020

Aceito: 5/04/2020

Publicado: 6/04/2020